

CUADERNOS DEL CONFLICTO
PEACE INITIATIVES AND
COLOMBIA'S ARMED CONFLICT



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CHANGES IN THE ANDEAN REGION AND FOREIGN POLICY ALTERNATIVES FOR COLOMBIA

This essay will focus on the international aspects of the Colombian armed conflict. If, in the 1990s, especially during the governments of Presidents César Gaviria and Ernesto Samper, Colombia's foreign policy was determined by the domestic struggle against drug trafficking, there is no doubt that during the administrations of Presidents Andrés Pastrana and Álvaro Uribe, it is the armed conflict that has taken on the determining role in foreign policy. During the government of President Pastrana, the search for allies to make feasible the negotiations with the FARC in El Caguán was described as "diplomacy for peace." And during the government of President Uribe, as a result of the domestic shift toward the democratic security policy to combat the FARC, foreign policy has been transformed into a search for allies to win the war.

In the two presidential terms of Uribe's the evolution in foreign policy in relation to the armed conflict has been reflected in two central aspects. The government has oscillated between two strategies—although it might say that they are complementary strategies:¹ on the one hand, the democratic security strategy, that is, the effort to defeat the FARC militarily and politically and, on the other hand, the strategy of rapprochement in search of a humanitarian agreement. Undoubtedly, the efforts to defeat the FARC have had more weight than those tending toward a humanitarian agreement.

President Uribe was elected and reelected with the clear mandate to combat the FARC and, in so doing, he has launched a coherent and successful campaign that is widely supported by public opinion. For this reason, the defeat of the FARC is the fundamental axis not only of his agenda with respect to the armed conflict, but also of his government agenda in general.

The Uribe administration revolves around the issue of democratic security and, more specifically, around the effort to defeat the FARC. ¿What foreign policy needs are imposed by this priority? From the beginning, President Uribe has had a coherent international discourse

and international actions related to democratic security. Thus, he has clearly framed Colombia's internal struggle against the FARC within the international struggle against terrorism. He shrewdly took advantage of the opportunity generated in the international community by the Al-Qaeda attacks against the United States in order to link the internal conflict with the world struggle against terrorism. Given the international cooperation Colombia has had in the struggle against domestic terror, President Uribe has always been emphatic about the need to support the global war on terrorism. As a matter of fact, Colombia was one of the only Latin American countries to support the war in Iraq. This support has left Colombia in a rather solitary position in Latin America, given that its only alliance has been with the United States. This alliance has become ever closer in almost every aspect of foreign policy. It has thus generated problems for Colombia in the context of the prevailing trend in Latin American countries, who do not share the world view of the Bush administration.

The emphasis on democratic security has led Colombia to adopt a foreign policy in which the United States plays a central role. In other words, Colombia's foreign policy is practically an American foreign policy. As a consequence, some of the actors who played a significant role in facilitating the El Caguán negotiations during the Pastrana administration—specifically the European Union and the United Nations—have distanced themselves from Colombia.

At the same time that it has advanced its security strategy, the government has sought a rapprochement with the FARC or has pursued certain initiatives to make a humanitarian agreement feasible. It is evident that, at certain moments, the humanitarian agreement has acquired some political importance and has led the government to make certain bold moves. These include the liberation of Rodrigo Granda, the release from prison of 100 FARC guerrillas, and the mediation of President Hugo Chávez in order to seek an agreement.

However, the logic of the humanitarian agreement is different from that of a foreign policy based on democratic security: the allies that are needed and the countries that could play a role in facilitating a humanitarian agree-

ment are different from the United States. In fact, they tend to be countries that have been critical of the foreign policy of the United States. This was one of the reasons why Colombia thought of Venezuela, France, Spain, and Switzerland when it tried to create an opportunity for the humanitarian agreement.

Each of these two strategies has a certain coherence. Of course, democratic security is more consistent given that it is the focus of President Uribe's government, while the humanitarian agreement is not. Each strategy also has different implications, which may not be ascribed the same level of importance.

Consider, for example, the characteristics and consequences of the 2008 Andean diplomatic crisis involving Ecuador and Colombia.² The debate was over two different political positions. For its part, Ecuador emphasized the defense of sovereignty and the inviolability of national territory, two principles embodied in the OAS charter. Colombia, meanwhile, consistently emphasized the war on terror, which has been Uribe's political discourse from his first day in office.

The debate took place in two very appropriate settings for discussing Latin American international relations: the OAS and the Rio Group. The participation of the OAS was requested by Ecuador through two mechanisms established by the organization: an extraordinary meeting of the Permanent Council and a Consultation Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The participation of the Rio Group, which captured the attention of citizens everywhere, was determinant, perhaps only by accident or coincidence, in that the group's annual summit happened to take place at the climax of the crisis and therefore served as the scene for a discussion that we had the opportunity to watch on television. The Ecuadoran discourse about the inviolability of national territory and the defense of sovereignty in the context of Latin American institutions turned out to be much stronger than the Colombian discourse about the war on terrorism. If one analyzes both OAS resolutions³, the way in which the debates unfolded, and finally the declaration of the Rio Group, it is evident that the anti-terrorist discourse is not very popular in Latin America.

Juan Tokatlian, a Colombian-Argentine specialist on Latin American foreign policy and regional foreign re-

lations, asked in an article published in *Cambio* magazine⁴ whether the war on terrorism would be extended to Latin America as a result of this diplomatic incident. This has still not happened. When the Al-Qaeda attacks against the United States took place, not even the Latin American members of the UN Security Council voted in favor of the resolutions adopted by the United Nations after the war.

Given its own traditions and the founding principles of the OAS charter, Latin America is much more sensitive to the issue of the defense of sovereignty, in part because almost every Latin American country has an unresolved problem with a neighbor or with another country in the hemisphere. Consequently, to legitimize intervention in the kind of situation that developed between Colombia and Ecuador could mean to accept that one day such intervention could legitimately take place in one's own country.

All of the above does not mean that Colombia, and particularly the government of Colombia, suffered a diplomatic "defeat." On the contrary, President Uribe, his ministers, and his ambassadors made almost euphoric statements regarding the successes they achieved; and the prevailing mood in the country was also one of euphoria and joy regarding the attack that killed Raúl Reyes. The polls indicate that after the incident with Ecuador, 84 percent of the Colombian population supported the president and were satisfied with the successes achieved against the FARC.

This could be interpreted simply as the fact that Colombian public opinion supports President Uribe's decision to give the war against the FARC precedence over diplomacy. Faced with the choice between normal diplomatic relations with our neighbors without any victories against the FARC, and successes against the FARC at the cost of problems with our neighbors, an overwhelming majority of Colombians undoubtedly supports President Uribe in preferring the accomplishments of democratic security which, as stated above, constitutes the fundamental axis of the Colombian public agenda.

The question then is clear: how far do we have to go in choosing some degree of isolation from Latin America in order to make democratic security feasible, or how possible is it to make a shift in foreign policy in order to

obtain more allies and not have to depend exclusively on the United States as an ally in this policy? The current policy is not likely to change in the next few years, given that it has become part of a political consensus embraced even by the leftist opposition party, the Democratic Pole. In the past elections, Democratic Pole candidates supported the democratic security policy; the policy has become so popular that it would be difficult for a candidate to suggest changing it. In this sense, it would be better to ask ourselves if it is possible to have a foreign policy that is different from the one we have now, while maintaining the domestic emphasis on democratic security. Personally, I consider that the first thing to do would be to start searching for new alternatives: The foreign policy of alliance with the United States is a period of review immediately after the electoral process in which the Democratic Party took over the majority in the Congress and consolidated his power by electing Barack Obama as U.S. president for the next four years. Second, a bad relationship with our neighbors is unsustainable.

A number of factors make it possible in principle to design a different foreign policy while upholding the same domestic priorities. But before I refer to the obstacles in order to that effect. The main obstacle is the way in which the alliance with the United States has been formulated: Latin America did not share the Bush administration's political conception of international reality. As long as President Uribe and Colombia are perceived as totally committed to a type of politics that is under revision, a rapprochement with the Latin American mainstream will be extremely difficult.

The second obstacle, as I mentioned, is the anti-terrorist rhetoric is totally artificial in the Latin American context. It is a rhetoric that is more relevant to other regions of the world and more characteristic of the circumstances faced by the United States after the Al-Qaeda attack. This rhetoric is not part of Latin American political culture.

A third obstacle has to do with the ideological differences between President Uribe and the presidents of other countries in the region with whom we have bilateral relations: President Chávez and President Correa. This crisis has taught us that cooperation and understanding in the midst of diversity are much more difficult to achieve

than we had expected. In 2007, perhaps, we would have been extolling the understanding among Correa, Uribe and Chávez in spite of their ideological differences. But the diplomatic crisis left us with a lesson: the ideological differences are very profound, they matter, and we have definitely not yet learned how to think in terms of integration in the context of ideological differences.

Although these obstacles exist, I also believe that there are some opportunities. First, the United States is in the process of changing its foreign policy. There are great expectations, not only in Latin America but also around the world, with the government of Barack Obama. Second, it is a fact that change in the United States tends to favor the moderation of the different discourses. This implies, for example, that both Uribe's "pro-Bush" discourse and Chávez's "anti-Bush" discourse could become more moderate. Third, we have observed signs of pragmatism on the part of many of those involved.

President Chávez undoubtedly surprised the Latin American community when, at the Rio Summit, he changed the tone of the meeting with a very moderate and conciliatory speech that made it possible to switch from the morning's insults to the afternoon's hugs that we witnessed on television. The turn taken by the meeting was a result of President Chávez's speech. According to press reports, this shift was influenced by Cuba, which had become concerned with the way things were developing and decided to intervene in order to find a better outcome. Even the other actors showed signs of pragmatism; that is, they appeared to prefer pragmatism over to the apocalyptic tone of certain speeches. President Uribe's accusation against President Chávez before the International Criminal Court, the possibility that Nicaragua would break off relations with Colombia, the closing of borders, and, of course, the possibilities of armed conflict were all mentioned, but in the final analysis, actors opted for pragmatism, at least for the moment.

In view of the above assessment of problems and opportunities, ¿What can Colombia do to move toward a less isolationist foreign policy and less dependence on the United States? I would like to suggest three possible answers:

1. *Colombia needs to adopt a pragmatic attitude in its foreign policy.* The government of President Uribe likely

thinks that that is exactly what it is doing, that is, that it has a pragmatic attitude toward those presidents whose ideology is different from its own. However, there is no doubt that in the latest crisis there was a clear division into ideological blocs, which closed off many possibilities for reaching an understanding among the members of the Andean community. This has to be avoided at all costs. Colombia's relationship with Venezuela is one in which many interests important to Colombia are at stake: Venezuela's mediation in the process with the ELN; its assistance in trying to reach a humanitarian agreement; the fact that trade between the two countries exceeds \$5 billion; and the fact that 7 million Colombian-Venezuelan dual citizens live on the border. For these reasons, it is impossible that Colombia and Venezuela sustain an ideological conflict. Concrete mechanisms must be sought to allow the nations to work together. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to define some of the issues. The first has to do with Venezuela's participation in affairs related to Colombia's internal armed conflict; as we have seen, this intervention seriously affects bilateral relations. Second, it would also be desirable to separate Colombia's relations with the United States from its relations with Venezuela. It is evident that U.S. interests in Venezuela are different from Colombia's interests.

2. *Moderation in Colombia's international discourse.*

This moderation needs to extend beyond the question of whether or not the FARC should be classified as a terrorist group. No matter how it is analyzed—legally, politically, semantically—the antiterrorist discourse closes many diplomatic doors for Colombia. *Cambio* magazine once received an anonymous proposal that is anything but farfetched: the idea of seeking allies against the FARC not on the basis of the antiterrorist struggle, but rather on the basis of the defense of democracy, a concept that the Latin American community has addressed and on which it has established mechanisms for collective intervention (for example, the famous OAS Democratic Charter). In other words, it is necessary to seek an alternative discourse. It is much more feasible to garner solidarity with respect to the internal conflict—a term the government does not agree with and does not like to use—than it is to gain solidarity using a discourse of antiterrorism,

especially when this discourse is fraught with indiscriminate condemnations of non-governmental organizations or defenders of human rights.

3. *Long-range Bilateral Policies.* Crafting long-term bilateral policies is easier said than done. However, it is essential that bilateral policies be conceived with a long-term perspective rather than on the basis of ideological differences. These policies must strive to achieve understanding and cooperation with respect to specific issues such as security and the war against drug trafficking. These are currently the most serious problems affecting the borders with Venezuela and Ecuador. The experience with Venezuela was very successful in the 1990s, when both countries considered the FARC their common enemy. Today, that same approach may not be feasible, but there must be cooperation mechanisms to fight common problems along the borders with Ecuador and Venezuela. •

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- ¹ The crisis between Ecuador and Colombia broke out after Luis Edgar Devia's death, alias "Raúl Reyes", a member of the Secretariat of the FARC, in a camp of the armed group in territory of Ecuador, approximately 1800 meters from the border with Colombia. The facts happened last March 1, 2008, were the beginning of a crisis in the bilateral relations that continues to today. While Ecuador complained for the violation of sovereignty by the Colombian Army, the Colombian Department of Foreign Affairs apologized for the action, but argued that it was carried out in conformity with the principle of legitimate defense, provided that it has been a custom of the FARC "to murder in Colombia and to invade the territory of the neighboring countries to shelter". After the exchange of statements between parts and the formal breaking-off of bilateral relations on the part of Ecuador, the efforts of the Summit of the Group of Rio, on March 10, 2008 and of the Foreign Ministers' Summit of the OEA, seven days later, were not sufficient to restore the Colombo-Ecuadoran relations.
 - ² Permanent Council of the Organization of American States. CP/RES. 930 (1632/08) Summons of Ministers' meeting consultation foreign relations and appointment commission (Approved in the celebrated session on March 5, 2008) and twentieth ministers' of meeting consultation foreign relations. OEA/Ser. F/II.25RC.25/doc. 7/08. Report of the commission of the OEA that visited Equator and Colombia (March 17, 2008).
 - ³ Colombia no obtuvo en la OEA todo lo que quería. *Cambio Magazine*, 18 March 2008.